

COLUMBIA COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

AGENDA ITEM REQUEST FORM

Department: BCC Administration

Meeting Date: 10/1/2026

1. Nature and purpose of agenda item:

Minutes - Workshop - 09/03/2026

2. Recommended Motion/Action:

Approve

3. Fiscal impact on current budget:

This item has no effect on the current budget.

Columbia County
Board of County Commissioners

Workshop

September 3, 2026

The Columbia County Board of County Commissioners met in a scheduled workshop in the auditorium of the School Board Administrative Complex at 03:00 P.M. The meeting opened with prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America followed.

Commissioners in Attendance: Chairman, Timothy Murphy
Commissioner, Robbie Hollingsworth
Commissioner, Kevin Parnell
Commissioner, Everett Phillips
Commissioner, Rocky Ford

Others in Attendance: County Manager, David Kraus (“CM”)
Assistant County Manager Kevin Kirby (ACM”)
Public Information Officer, Dennis Rivera
Economic Development Director, Jennifer Daniels

Discussion and Action Items:

(1). Data Center Discussion

Workshop Purpose and Guest Introductions:

- Chairman, Timothy Murphy introduced Commissioner Terry Burroughs from Okeechobee, Florida, noting his experience with data centers.
- Chairman, Timothy Murphy introduced Nathan Palardy, Assistant Professor and Extension Economist at the University of Florida, who would provide an informational overview of data center economics.
- The workshop format was outlined as guest presentations followed by audience input.

Data Center Context and Regulatory Strategy Commissioner, Terry Burroughs.

- Background: Terry Burroughs, an Okeechobee County Commissioner with 32 years in telecommunications, emphasized the need for accurate information over online speculation, citing the rapid pace of technological

change. He referred to Loudoun County, Virginia, a major data center hub with 220 centers, as a case study. Its prominence is due to a historic concentration of fiber connectivity and a robust power grid.

- **Comprehensive Plans vs. Land Development Regulations (LDRs):** He advised against hardcoding data center sitting into comprehensive plans, as it reduces local control. Instead, he recommended using LDRs to control sitting in industrial or heavy commercial areas, retaining flexibility.
- **Key LDR Considerations:**
 - **Setbacks and Power:** Establish clear standards for setbacks and on-site power strategies, including microgrids.
 - **Noise Management:** Differentiate between DbA (treble) and DbC (bass) noise and specify measurement methods in code.
 - **Site Appearance:** Encourage facades and landscaping to blend facilities into their surroundings.
 - **Water Use:** Modern closed-loop cooling can significantly reduce water consumption. LDRs should include provisions for water treatment/regeneration during system maintenance.
- **Geopolitical Context:** Commissioner, Jeff Burroughs mentioned a Wall Street Journal article on geopolitical competition, underscoring the strategic importance of informed local policymaking. He stated that he will share the Wall Street Journal article on geopolitical AI issues with Economic Development Director, Jennifer Daniels.

Data Center Economic Development Overview (Presentation by Nathan Palardy)

- **Role and Expertise:** Nathan Palardy, Assistant Professor and Professor and Extension Economist at the University of Florida clarified he was attending in an educational capacity to discuss the public finance implications, ROI, and community benefit agreements related to data centers.
- **Florida Data Center Landscape:** Florida has 111 data centers, mostly concentrated in metro areas (Miami, Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville). Rural areas are becoming more competitive due to the need for more land and energy access.
- **Types of Data Centers:**
 - **Crypto:** Small-scale, highly energy intensive.
 - **Hyperscale:** Increasingly common, requiring large land footprints (300-500k sq ft) and significant energy.
 - **Telecom/Retail:** Smaller facilities for business or carrier needs.
 - **Wholesale:** Investor-owned facilities renting space to multiple tenants, with needs similar to hyperscale.
- **Economic Impact:**
 - **Jobs:** Data centers create limited permanent jobs (1-3 per 10,000 sq ft). Around 80% of announced jobs are temporary construction roles.

- o **Local Spending:** On average, about 26% of capital expenditure is spent locally (20% on construction, 6% on land).
- o **Tax Revenue:** The primary economic benefit comes from property taxes and tangible personal property taxes on IT equipment, which is replaced frequently (every 2-5 years). This revenue is highly dependent on whether tax abatements are granted.

Tax System Comparison (Florida vs. Virginia): Commissioner, Robby Hollingsworth cautioned that Florida counties may not achieve tax revenues comparable to Loudoun County (\$733M in 2023). Virginia allows different tax rates for different property classes, enabling a high effective rate on IT equipment, whereas Florida's constitution requires a uniform rate and caps county millage at 10.

- **Incentives:** Both speakers advised against offering tax incentives, as the main economic benefit is tax revenue, not job creation.

Legislative Context and Local Authority (Senate Bill 484)

- Senate Bill 480 preserves local land use authority and includes cost-of-service protections requiring data center developers to fund their own infrastructure.
- The bill requires new consumptive water-use permits for projects over 50 megawatts and restricts utilities from serving data centers owned by foreign countries of concern.
- Commissioner, Jeff Burroughs spoke about a key concern was raised that ratepayer protections in Senate Bill 480 apply to investor-owned utilities, not co-ops or municipally owned utilities, requiring extra vigilance in local agreements.
- There was also concern that the state government might preempt local regulations in the future.
- Commissioner, Jeff Burroughs made the comment that Economic Development Director, Jennifer Daniels has examples of benefit agreements
- Commissioner, Robby Hollingsworth spoke about in the future do you see zoning issues in small counties, rules like live local can not say anything to solar fields.
- Chairman, Timothy Murphy spoke about the 250,00 solar fields are coming, not sure who is getting them in November. Florida grids systems are not set up. FPL has a small one.

Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) and Financial Protections

- CBAs are legally binding contracts to guarantee local amenities, jobs, or mitigations (e.g., setbacks, water caps, local hiring) in exchange for community support.
- Requiring special use exemptions rather than allowing data centers "by right" provides leverage for negotiating strong CBAs.

- Examples of CBA terms include funding tech innovation hubs (Microsoft in Wisconsin) or STEM schools (semiconductor firm in North Carolina).
- It was suggested that counties require upfront payments and a cash security deposit to ensure funds are available if a company fails to meet its obligations, including decommissioning.
- Nathan Palardy, Assistant Professor, spoke about Microsoft doing HUB.
- Commissioner, Jeff Burroughs spoke about school training and doing the right thing and good decisions. Bad information will make you make bad decisions.
- Chairman, Timothy Murphy spoke about that AI has taken over.
- Commissioner, Jeff Burroughs spoke about hospitals using AI and carmakers they all use AI.
- Discussion ensued.

Environmental, Infrastructure, and Community Concerns

- **Water:** Water usage was a primary concern. While modern closed-loop systems can be efficient (50,000 gallons/day), regulations must be precise. The Suwannee River Water Management District is expected to implement stricter rules on July 1, which could be a determinative factor. A CBA in Lancaster, PA, reportedly capped use at 20,000 gallons/day. Concerns were also raised about potential water contamination (heavy metals, PFAS), with speakers urging pre-construction baseline testing and continuous monitoring.
- Commissioner, Rocky Ford asked the question about the water being contaminated when it goes through the systems heavy metals.
- Nathan Palardy, Assistant Professor and Extension Economist at the University of Florida, stated there are no court cases at this time.
- Commissioner, Everett Phillips made a comment about the building size.
- Commissioner, Robby Hollingsworth made a comment about water restriction, Suwannee River Water Management District has strict regulations and that is a big deal for us.
- Commissioner, Jeff Burroughs spoke about Suwannee River Water Management District will play a big role in allowing a data center in.
- **Power:** Florida's grid reportedly has limited capacity for hyperscale data centers. Microgrids and emerging technologies like small nuclear reactors were discussed as potential solutions.
- **Noise and Light:** Regulations should include penalties for violations. A common standard is 50 decibels at the property line, but measurements should also be taken at the nearest residence.
- **Strategic Siting:** Speakers recommended directing data centers to underutilized sites like brownfields or reclaimed mining lands to preserve agricultural land and rural character.
- **Quality of Life:** Chairman, Timothy Murphy emphasized that economic development should maintain or improve residents' quality of life and that the county's natural assets (springs, rivers) are paramount.

- **Fire Safety:** The need for specific fire prevention requirements beyond standard sprinklers was noted and recommended for inclusion in the new regulatory framework.
- Chairman, Timothy Murphy spoke about certain fire prevention.
- Commissioner, Rocky Ford spoke about the homestead going away will not be able to tax-10 million dollars the first year.
- Commissioner, Jeff Burrough made the comment to talk to other commissioners. Suwannee River Water Management District will protect the water.

(2). Chairman, Timothy Murphy opened the public comment:

Members of the public offering comments:

- Citizen – Samantha Land
- Citizen- Nina Rowan
- Citizen – Jesse Crane
- Citizen – J.B Parrish
- Citizen – Phillip Hardwick

Public Comments and Next Steps for the County

- Public comments expressed strong concerns about water use, pollution, noise, and the potential negative impact on the county's rural identity and economy.
- Commissioner, Kevin Parnell urged the county to strengthen its Land Development Regulations (LDRs) before proposals advance, creating a "bulletproof" framework. A moratorium was discussed as a tool to buy time, but with legal risks.
- One speaker requested commissioners publish a document affirming no financial conflicts of interest related to data centers.
- The meeting concluded with an agreement to get ahead of the issue through strong LDRs and to schedule future workshops on agricultural and environmental impacts.

Staff Comments: None.

Commissioner Comments: Chairman, Timothy Murphy thanked the speakers that come today. (See attached presentation paperwork).

Commissioner, Jeff Burroughs- from Okeechobee, Florida.

Nathan Palardy, Assistant Professor and Extension Economist at the University of Florida.

Adjournment:

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:35 P.M.

ATTEST:

Timothy Murphy, Chairman
Board of County Commissioners

James M. Swisher, Jr.
Clerk of Circuit Court & County Comptroller

